

(TMI Journal, Vol. III Nos. 1&2, Winter-Spring 2011)

BECOMING OUR OWN GUINEA PIGS - A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXPERIENCES OF ‘WONDER’ AND PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

What is the source of philosophical thought? Why do we ask fundamental questions about human existence? Early philosophers like Socrates, whose ideas and practices were shamanistic, believed that rational thinking was rooted in and fed by non-rational experiences, such as visions, dreams, trances, ecstasies, mystical encounters, and other experiences of wonder that excite our curiosity and imagination. But modern Western philosophy largely rejected this older view, holding instead that genuine philosophical analysis can only arise through the purging of all such “extra-rational” influences that interfere with our use of reason, logic, and observation via the physical senses. This paper outlines a new research project, to be undertaken by the author in concert with The Monroe Institute®, that is designed to explore the question of how experiences of “wonder” relate to processes of philosophical-type thinking, and in particular how this question is addressed by TMI program participants.

Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre, a world-renown philosopher (who happened to be my mentor), once candidly admitted to a BBC radio interviewer that philosophy “does tend to sterilize the mind and imagination far too easily” (Magee, 1971, p. 199). When I initially read this remark as an eager college undergraduate and enthusiastic neophyte philosophy major, I found it curious, if not incredible. To me, philosophy was a brand new, exciting world of fascinating ideas and heroic, inspiring thinkers. Yet, by the time I entered graduate school 4 years later, it would prove eerily prophetic of my own personal crisis. For despite all my considerable hard work

and achievements—or perhaps, rather, because of them—my inner life felt like a well run dry. I found myself wandering alone, without a compass, lost in a mental desert.

Thus began my quest for what the late mythologist Joseph Campbell called “the waters of life” (Campbell with Moyers, 1988, p. 121)—a magical elixir that would somehow revivify my stale intellect and dry-as-dust imagination. I needed to find a counterbalance to the narrow, reductive rationalism that passes for “the love of wisdom,” the literal translation of the Greek word *philosophia*. I did not quit my academic studies—although I was sorely tempted to at times. Instead, I began certain “unofficial” investigations into subjects that would have scandalized my professors but which reflected certain erstwhile experiences and interests that had long lain fallow: mysticism, extrasensory perception, out-of-body experiences, dreams, shamanism, and the like. In public, I was a conventional aspiring academic; in private, I had become a secret searcher after heresies.

Eventually, I would learn to blend these two sides of myself as I gradually shifted my “official” areas of study into subjects closer to my true interests in myth, religion, and the ranges of human consciousness. It was during that early, intensive period of searching—in late 1979 or early 1980—that I initially discovered a mesmerizing volume entitled *Journeys Out of the Body* (1971) by Robert A. Monroe. That book struck a particularly deep chord, as did the author’s two sequels, *Far Journeys* (1985) and *Ultimate Journey* (1994). These ignited in me a strong desire to visit The Monroe Institute®. I finally did so in 2000, when I took my GATEWAY VOYAGE®.

Since then, I have attended other Institute programs (LIFELINE®, EXPLORATION 27®, and STARLINES). I wrote about my experiences at TMI in my first book (Felser, 2005) and in several published articles (Felser, 2000; 2004), including one in the *TMI Focus* (2002). In addition, I have been honored with invitations to attend two professional seminars, once in 2006 as the keynote speaker (Felser, 2006) and most recently in 2010 as a guest participant. That makes for a solid decade of active and fruitful involvement with TMI and over 30 years of familiarity with the work of Robert Monroe.

Now, thanks to a recently granted sabbatical from teaching duties that happens to coincide with the Institute’s new direction in qualitative research (more on that below), my involvement with TMI is about to be taken to the next level, in the form of a collaborative research project. As I will discuss below, this study will explore the very issues I have wrestled with for the past 30 years in my own life-career—namely, the relationship between the quest for meaning and questions of meaning, between trans-rational experience and rational thinking, and between wonderment and wondering. In short, I am asking, “How does genuine philosophical inquiry relate to expansions of consciousness?”

The Quest and Question

“Nothing shapes our lives so much as the questions we ask—or refuse to ask,” declared that inveterate spiritual traveler, Sam Keen (1994). “We are all questioners, but the questions that animate us are profoundly different” (p. 14). Indeed, they are. Keen’s longtime friend and colleague Joseph Campbell (1988) may well have been right when he lamented that, for many people today, the only important question is “where their money is coming from and where it’s going to go” (p. 14). Yet, it is not so for all. Witness author, engineer, and consciousness explorer Bruce Moen (1997), who credits his serendipitous discovery of the books of Bob Monroe, as well as his subsequent attendance at the Institute’s GATEWAY VOYAGE and LIFELINE programs, to his “great curiosity”—a fiery spark that ignited his lifelong search for answers to what he calls his “Three Great Questions”: “Where did I come from before I was born? What am I supposed to do while I’m living here? Where do I go when I die?” (p. 24).[1]

Now, these just happen to be the big, meaty, metaphysical questions concerning human destiny, freedom, and the nature of existence that, in ancient times, were thought to be the special province of philosophy: What is the meaning of life—its significance, value, and purpose? Who and what are we? What is this thing we call “reality”? More recently, however, mainstream Anglo-American philosophers of the logical positivist and linguistic schools have dismissed such large-scale questions as silly and meaningless verbiage, arising either from a perverse inability to discern rational (scientific or common) sense from irrational (religious or mystical) nonsense (e.g., Ayer, 1936/1952; Reichenbach, 1951) or from certain strictly linguistic errors that could be avoided by a properly rigorous analysis (e.g., Austin, 1962). All are the intellectual descendants of the British philosopher G. E. Moore (1873-1958), who once remarked that, as far as he could tell, philosophical problems arose not from the world but rather from the ridiculous things that philosophers have said about it (Warnock, 1958/1966, p. 11). Even some contemporary postmodernists (e.g., Rorty, 1982, p. xi) echo this dismissive attitude toward the big questions and the “cosmic anxieties” (Warnock, p. 10) that inspire them.

Such churlish views nevertheless clash with a Western tradition that goes all the way back to Plato—and even further still. It was Plato who famously declared that philosophy begins in the experience of wonder (Plato, 1949). By “wonder,” I would argue that Plato meant not only the intellectual curiosity and sense of perplexity that drive some of us to try to solve puzzles, pursue mysteries, and parse meanings but also the feelings of awe and rapture that accompany the visionary beholding of “other realities” that leave the beholder speechless or groping for words. For Plato, the analytical thinker was also—and at the same time—a profound mystic (Findlay, 1978, pp. 15-16). These, in fact, represent the twin poles or sides of “wonder”—the intellectual and the mystical, the sense-making and sense-transcending—experienced in tandem by Plato’s great mentor, Socrates, whose lifelong philosophical quest was born in a personal crisis triggered by the enigmatic pronouncement of the Oracle of

Delphi, which declared him to be the wisest of all. But he did not consider himself wise at all. So what did it mean?

Socrates' effort to reconcile this contradiction led him to conclude that at least he recognized how ignorant he was, whereas the vast majority did not. His dissatisfaction with conventional beliefs and values was fueled by his mystical trances, in which he had visions of other realities and communed with the dead. In the Symposium dialogue, Plato accordingly eulogized his teacher as "a skilful magician, an alchemist [i.e., herbalist], a true sophist" (Plato, 1951, p. 82; cf. Ruck, 1986, p. 177) who yearned after knowledge and loved wisdom. The seer and the seeker of truth were thus one and the same, co-existing side-by-side in a creative synergy in which each side nurtured the other.

This symbiosis is precisely what led classical scholars like Carl A. P. Ruck (1986, pp. 151-177) and E. R. Dodds (1951, pp. 135-178) to identify Socrates with the primordial lineage of shamanism. Indeed, anthropologist (and shamanic practitioner) Michael Harner (1980/1990) has defined the shaman as one who goes on otherworldly journeys in quest of knowledge and power in order to help others and restore wholeness (health). In the process, said Harner, "the shaman typically experiences an ineffable joy in what he sees, an awe of the beautiful and mysterious worlds that open before him" (p. 21). This is the mystical aspect of wonder. But, he said, there is also the critical aspect that strives to penetrate the mystery and solve the riddle of human existence: "The shaman is forever trying to articulate his personal revelatory experiences as though they were the pieces of a great cosmic jigsaw puzzle" (p. 45). Thus, said Harner, the shaman, like the scientist, is an empiricist, or one who relies on experience, rather than authority or mere armchair speculation, as the source of knowledge and primary method of research (pp. 45-6).

It is precisely on this last point that modern philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/1984) would demur. Nietzsche saw not a synergy but an irreconcilable opposition between the mystical side of wonder and genuine intellectual questioning. In his view, science and philosophy are utterly incompatible with otherworldly visions and mystical experiences, which would vanish into thin air if scrutinized by reason—if we truly allow ourselves to think about them. Only those, he said, who "thirst after reason, [and] are determined to scrutinize [their] experiences as severely as a scientific experiment—hour after hour, day after day" (p. 253) are true philosophers. "We ourselves wish to be our experiments and guinea pigs," he concluded. Real philosophy is thus born with the death of wonder, which to Nietzsche is only the bewitching enchantment of irrationalism.

Or is it? Who is on the right track, Plato or Nietzsche? What is the relationship between critical thinking, deep questioning, and intellectual curiosity on the one hand, and visionary or mystical consciousness on the other? In other words, are experiences of wonder—of the kind that leave us dumbfounded and speechless (or just plain grateful), that defy our common sense and both

challenge and expand our notion of what is possible—the sweet ambrosia or the bitter hemlock of philosophical inquiry? What might it mean to become one's own guinea pig, even while not rejecting wonder? Is this even possible?[2]

The Project

These, then, are the very questions that, in one guise or another, I have been more or less continuously wrestling with over the 30-odd years of my own philosophical career. They are also at the heart of the exciting new research project that I am currently undertaking in collaboration with The Monroe Institute and its new director of research, Dr. Hillary Webb, that explores the question of whether (and if so, how) expanded states of awareness conducive to experiences of wonder are related to acts of wondering (questioning, thinking, reflecting, seeking) and, in particular, how this question is addressed by TMI program participants. The Monroe Institute is a uniquely propitious setting for generating and cultivating experiences of wonder. It is, as many would attest, a wonder-full place! What better venue to explore such questions?

But a philosopher doing field research, you ask? Yes, I admit this is indeed a radical departure from the kind of armchair reflections, or even the library and archival investigations, in which I have been engaged in the past. Instead of interpreting pre-existing texts, or creating new ones in the solitude of my study, the volunteer participants and I will be co-creating the very texts (in the form of initial surveys, follow-up questions, and perhaps even face-to-face interviews) whose meanings will become the subject of interpretation. It is a full collaboration all around.

Because I will be employing a qualitative rather than a quantitative research approach (inspired in great part by the work of Smith and Osborn, [2003]), I will be exploring relationships between phenomena in an open-ended fashion, using semi-structured instruments, as opposed to testing pre-formed hypotheses with highly structured methods and analytical tools designed to collect numerical data. Rather than seek to explain and predict strictly causal relationships between objects or events, or to ascertain general characteristics of a widespread population, my aim will be to describe, in depth and detail, the experiences of selected individuals and to try and grasp the meaning that those experiences have for them. This type of qualitative approach will necessitate using a relatively small sample of participants (some veteran researchers suggest as few as 3 or as many as 10), whose selection will be based on the responses provided by them to the initial (confidential) on-line surveys that will soon be made available to all voluntary eligible participants (that is, graduates of selected TMI programs) on my web site. Link to: www.everythingtriestoberound.com

To start with, I will want to know about the types of questions that bring individuals to TMI's residential programs in the first place; what kinds of answers, if any, that they receive in the experiences of "wonder" that they might have; how and what they might think about those

experiences, if and when they subsequently reflect on them; and whether these experiences then go on to foster new questions or new forms of questions that in turn precipitate a still-further search for answers and/or additional experiences, in an ongoing, perhaps open-ended, process.

Once again, my aim will be to describe and make sense of how participants perceive and make sense of their own processes, not to try to explain why some may have certain kinds of experiences (or thoughts) and others do not. Nor will I try to objectively validate (or invalidate) those experiences (or thoughts). This is the essence of the phenomenological method pioneered by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). It was Husserl who urged us to set aside what we regard as “common sense” (which is mostly inherited prejudices or habits of thought and perception) and even our philosophical, scientific, and religious theories in order “to allow us see and describe experience in its lived purity” (Kohak, 1978, p. 27), that is, as a meaningful and intelligible phenomenon in its own right, prior to our sophisticated theorizing about it. The primary aim of the phenomenologist “is not to ‘explain’ . . . experience but first to understand it” (Kohak, p. 41).

To both accurately describe and sympathetically understand the relationship between our experiences of wonder and the act of wondering about our experiences is thus the goal of my new and exciting exploration of human consciousness. All aboard! I welcome feedback—anyone wishing to offer comments or suggestions regarding this project is cordially invited to contact me at JFelser@Kingsborough.edu.

Endnotes

1 The relationship between experiential quest and the act and attitude of questioning raises some thorny classical chicken-and-egg issues that will have to be explored. For example, was Moen’s curiosity unbidden (i.e., essentially uncaused) or did it motivate him to seek experiences of expanded consciousness? Or, did prior experiences of such nonordinary states (like the childhood dream of a possible past life episode he relates in the same chapter, following his mention of his “Three Great Questions”) spark his curiosity and the nascent questioning? It may very well be, as the psychologist Abraham Maslow (1963) has stated, that certain psychologically healthy individuals are blessed with an instinctive drive to know things, to find out the truth even if it makes them unhappy or uncomfortable, and thus are “positively attracted to the mysterious, to the unknown, to the puzzling and the unexplained” (cited in Wilson, 1966/1980, p. 78), whereas the psychologically sick or those with a weak ego are fearful and threatened by such prospects. In that case, one could point to an innate drive of curiosity, essentially uncaused by any particular experience of “wonder” (though perhaps cultivated through a general upbringing productive of and conducive to psychological health) as the source of the quest.

In examining the issue of creativity and the relationship between questioning and questing, author Joseph Chilton Pearce (2007) has identified what he called a “dynamic interplay or looping effect [that] takes place between the bottom-up activity of our volitional, thinking brain-mind and the top-down action from some nebulous field of potential outside our thought” (p. 40). This larger “nebulous field of potential” is what we would directly encounter in those experiences of wonderment to which I have been referring, and which Pearce dubs the “Eureka!” experience insofar as it is, implicitly or explicitly, understood as providing the answer(s) to certain longstanding and important question(s). A “strange loop” indeed!

2 Nietzsche (1887/1974) complained that mystical types are willfully irrational and dishonest because they never ask themselves the really tough questions: “What did I really experience? What happened in me and around me at that time? Was my reason bright enough? Was my will opposed to all deceptions of the senses and bold in resisting the fantastic?” (p. 253). One striking counter-example to Nietzsche’s thesis is Bob Monroe himself, as the record of *Journeys Out of the Body* (1971) quite readily attests. It is clear that he did ask himself (over and over again) Nietzsche’s very questions: Am I sane? Am I mentally and physically healthy? Is this real? Can I trust my perceptions? Only gradually, and very reluctantly, did he begin to accept the validity of his out-of-body excursions—and only when he was forced to question his own most cherished beliefs and assumptions: “If I accepted the data as fact, it struck hard at nearly all of my life experience to that date, my training, my concepts, and my sense of values. Most of all, it shattered my faith in the totality and certainty of our culture’s scientific knowledge” (Monroe, 1971, p. 31). Even as his experiences of “wonder” expanded in their depth and intensity, he never ceased to value questioning himself or his cultural assumptions, scientific or religious, as his remarks in *Ultimate Journey* (1994) underscore: “Nothing is sacred to the point where it should not be investigated or put under inquiry” (p. 109). Indeed, he came to view the development of this questioning faculty as the prime purpose of human existence in what he dubbed the “Earth Life System” (p. 86) and therefore as perfectly compatible with our enjoyment of the fullest range of possible human experiences—including and especially experiences in states of consciousness other than the normal physical waking kind.

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